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AUTHOR Hammer, Charles H.; Rohr, Carol L.
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ABSTRACT

The National Center for Education Statistics 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey examined the prior work experience of elementary and secondary public school principals. The survey found that 98.7 percent of principals had taught an average of 10.6 years before taking their administrative positions. The number of years of teaching increased with age; those under 40 spent an average of 8 years teaching, and those 50 or over spent an average of 11.3 years teaching. Nearly half of the principals surveyed, 49.8 percent, held other administrative positions in education for an average of 5.7 years before becoming principals. About 17 percent of the principals held nonteaching, nonadministrative positions such as guidance counselor, librarian, or curriculum specialist before becoming principals, averaging about 6 years in those positions. (JPT)

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ISSUE BRIEF

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Teaching, Administrative, and Other Work Experience of Public School Principals

What types of prior work experience do elementary and secondary public school principals bring to their job? What percentage hold teaching jobs before becoming principals, and for how many years? What percentage hold other administrative and nonteaching, nonadministrative jobs in elementary and secondary education before becoming principals, and for how long?[1] These and related issues can be addressed with data from the NCES 1990-91 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS).

What percentage of public school principals teach elementary or secondary school before becoming principals? How many years do they teach?

Traditionally, principals have been drawn from the ranks of teachers. This practice provides the principalship with a pool of candidates experienced at the classroom level and affords teachers the opportunity to move into the ranks of administrators. The SASS data indicate that this tradition continues. Nearly all principals in the 1990-91 school year reported that they were teachers before becoming principals (table 1). Those who taught averaged about 10 1/2 years of teaching. Even the younger principals (under 40) averaged a substantial number of years of teaching (8 years) before becoming principals.

Table 1. Percentage of principals who taught before becoming principals, and average years of teaching, by age: 1990-91

Age group	Percent	Average years*
All	98.7	10.6
50 or over	98.5	11.3
40-49	98.9	10.6
Under 40	98.7	8.0

*Includes only principals with teaching experience.

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1990-91.

What percentage of public school principals hold other school or district administrative positions before becoming principals, and for how long?

The principal's job requires not only an understanding of the educational process at the classroom level, but the skills to coordinate the efforts of a staff that includes teachers, other administrative personnel, and other professional and nonprofessional staff. About half of all principals in the 1990-91 school year came to their position with other administrative experience at either the school or district level (table 2). (Examples of other administrative positions at the school level include department head and assistant principal, and at the district level, curriculum specialist and subject matter supervisor.) Those who held such positions averaged about 5 1/2 years in those positions before becoming principals.

Since most principals held teaching positions before becoming principals, this means that close to half came to their job with both administrative and teaching experience. However, it also means that about half came to their job with no administrative experience in school or district positions.

[1] In this *Issue Brief* the assumption is made that all years in administrative positions, excluding principalships, and all years in nonteaching, nonadministrative positions occurred prior to the first principalship year. (e.g., the 1990-91 SASS data indicate that about half of all principals were previously assistant principals or program directors, and nearly 10 percent were guidance counselors. While the data in table 2 include the entire period prior to the 1990-91 school year, the consistency between the percentage reported in this table and the percentage who were assistant principals or program directors prior to becoming principals supports this assumption.)

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What percentage of public school principals hold nonteaching, nonadministrative positions in elementary and secondary education before becoming principals, and for how long?

About 17 percent of all principals held nonteaching, nonadministrative positions (e.g., guidance counselor, curriculum specialist, librarian) at some point in their careers before becoming principals, averaging about 6 years in those positions (table 3). Additionally, most of them had experience in other positions in their pre-principalship years: Many (almost 60 percent of the 17 percent) held other administrative positions at the school or district level, and nearly all (about 98 percent of the 17 percent) held teaching positions.

Major findings

- Almost all principals teach before becoming principals, averaging about 10 1/2 years of teaching experience.
- About half of all principals have administrative experience in elementary and secondary education before becoming principals, averaging about 5 1/2 years.
- Less than 20 percent of all principals have prior nonteaching, nonadministrative experience in elementary and secondary education before becoming principals, averaging about 6 years.

For more information on the Schools and Staffing Survey, see the following reports:

Choy, S.P., Medrich, E.A., Henke, R.R., and Bobbitt, S.A. *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1987-88.* National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 92-120.

Hammer, C., and Gerald, E. *Selected Characteristics of Public and Private School Administrators (Principals): 1987-88.* National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 90-085.

Kaufman, S., and Huang, H. *1990-91 SASS: Sample Design and Estimation.* National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 92-151.

Table 2. Percentage of principals who held administrative positions in education before becoming principals, and average years spent in those positions, by age: 1990-91

Age group	Percent	Average years*
All	49.8	5.7
50 or over	49.8	7.0
40-49	51.3	4.9
Under 40	42.9	3.7

*Includes only principals who held other administrative positions.

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1990-91.

Table 3. Percentage of principals who held nonteaching, nonadministrative positions in elementary and secondary education before becoming principals, and average years spent in those positions, by age: 1990-91

Age group	Percent	Average years*
All	16.7	5.9
50 or over	18.3	6.0
40-49	16.3	6.0
Under 40	12.8	4.3

*Includes only principals who held nonteaching, nonadministrative positions.

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, 1990-91.

Issue Briefs present information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences reported are statistically significant at the .05 level. In the design, conduct, and data processing of NCES surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling errors, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error.

The 1990-91 SASS data on average years of experience in other positions differ from comparable 1987-88 SASS data where all principals were used in the computation of average years. The base for the 1990-91 data includes only those principals with the particular work experience while the base for the 1987-88 data includes all principals.

This *Issue Brief* was prepared by Charles H. Hammer, NCES, and Carol L. Rohr, Pinkerton Computer Consultants, Inc. To obtain standard errors for this *Issue Brief* or additional information about the Schools and Staffing Survey, contact Charles H. Hammer (202) 219-1330. To order additional copies of this *Issue Brief* or other NCES publications, call 1-800-424-1616.

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